

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

USMISSION USUN

USIA WASHDC

DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 6426

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE

SUBJECT: SYRIAN STRATEGY IN LEBANON FOLLOWING INSTALLATION OF

SARKIS

REF: DAMASCUS 5843, 5711, 5535

1. SUMMARY: SARG LEADERSHIP MUST CONCENTRATE ON BEST
STRATEGY TO ENHANCE NEW LEBANESE PRESIDENT'S EFFECTIVENESS IN
OFFICE WHILE AT SAME TIME SECURING LEGITIMIZATION OF
SYRIAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN LEBANON. MAJOR MILITARY
OFFENSEIVE AIMED AT CRUSHING SYRIA'S OPPONENTS STILL
POSSIBLE BUT REPORTEDLY NOT ASAD'S PRESENT INTENTION; ON
OTHER HAND, MERELY CONTINUING CURRENT PRESSURE TO SHITTLE
DOWN SYRIA'S OPPOSITION IN LEBANON UNLIKELY TO BETTER
PRESENT STALEMATE. AMONG POSSIBLE POLITICAL MOVES WOULD
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BE FOR SARKIS TO TRY TO ACCOMPLISH SYRO-EGYPTIAN

RECONCILIATION AS PRELUDE TO LEBANESE SETTLEMENT AND FOR ASAD TO PROPOSE TOKEN SYRIAN TROOP PULLBACK TO CREATE NEGOTIATING MEMENTUM AND THEREBY IMPLICITLY LEGITIMIZE PRESENCE OF SYRIAN FORCES. END SUMMARY.

2. NOW THAT KAMAL ASSAD HAS ANNOUNCED THAT PARLIAMENTARY SESSION TO INSTALL SARKIS WILL TAKE PLACE IN CHTAURA, GENERAL FEELING IN DAMASCUS IS THAT SARG "OVER THE HUMP" IN SENSE OF SEATING IN OFFICE INDIVIDUAL IN WHOSE CANDIDACY SYRIA HAS INVESTED SO MUCH EFFORT AND PRESTIGE. ALTHOUGH WE STILL PICKING UP RUMORS THAT DAMASCUS PLANNING DECISIVE MILITARY ACTION ON ONE HAND AND THAT CHAMOUN INTENDING TO AMMOUNCE ESTABLISHMENT OF CHRISTIAN STATE IN LEBANON ON OTHER HAND, SYRIA SEEKS TO HAVE SAFELU SURMOUNTED NUMEROUS OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED DURING HIGH-RISK PERIOD UP TO SEPT. 23 (DAMASCUS 5535). DAMASCUS LEADERSHIP NOW FACES COMPLEX JOB OF ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESIDENT SARKIS THAT WILL LEGITIMIZE SYRIA'S MILITARY PRESENCE IN LEBANON UNTIL SECURITY RESTORED TO THAT COUNTRY WITHOUT UNDERMINING SARKIS' ALREADY SOMEWAHT TARNISHED (IN EYES OF LEBANESE LEFTISTS/ PALESTINIANS) CREDENTIALS AS INDEPENDENT NATIONAL LEBANESE LEADER.

3. SYRIA'S BASIC STRATEGY OPTIONS IN COMING PERIOD REMAIN AS IDENTIFIED IN DAMASCUS 5711 -- SARG MAY EITHER SEEK A) TO OVERTURN EXISITNG BALANCE OF FORCES IN LEBANON BY DECISIVE MILITARY ACTION AIMED AT CRUSHING ITS ADVERSARIES INCLUDING OCCUPYING BEIRUT AND SIDON, OR B) IT CAN REFRAIN FROM MAJOR MILITARY INITIATIVES WHILE, THROUGH STEADY POLITICAL PRESSURE AND CONTINUED MILITARY STALEMATE, IT WHITTLES DOWN SUPPORT FOR JUMBLATT AND DRAWS PALESTINAIN ELEMENTS SEEKING RECONCILIATION WITH DAMASCUS EVER CLOSER TO SYRIAN ORBIT AND TOWARD AGREEMENT WITH SARKIS.

4. QUESTION ARISES WHETHER DAMASCUS CAN BE REASONABLY CONFIDENT THAT CONTINUATION OF LATTER STRATEGY WOULD LEAD TO ACCEPTABLE LEBANESE SETTLEMENT? WE UNDERSTAND ASAD HAS INFORMED BAATH PARTY REGIONAL COMMAND THAT MILITARY PRESENCE IN LEBANON NOW COSTING SYRIA 10 MILLION L.S.

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(\$2.6 MILLION) DAILY, AND SAME SOURCE HAS DESCRIBED SAUDI FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AS "LIMITED." SARG LEADERSHIP CANNOT BE CERTAIN THAT PERSISTENT APPLICATION OF PRESSURE ON ITS ADVERSARIES WILL BRING THEM TO HEEL AS LONG AS THEY RECEIVING EGYPTIAN MATERIAL AND POLITICAL SUPPORT. MAINTAINING THE BALANCE OF POWER IN LEBANON MAY THUS APPEAR TO SARG AS FINANCIALLY BURDENSONE ENDURANCE CONTEST WHICH COULD GRADUALLY UNDERMINE WHATEVER EFFECTIVENESS SARKIS MAY BRING

TO HIS OFFICE AND FROM WHICH MOST LIKELY RESULT WOULD BE STALEMATE SIMILAR TO WHAT WE NOW WITNESSING WITH ONLY MARGINAL CHANCE FOR SYRIAN SUCCESS. ODDS ARE THAT DAMASCUS WILL DECIDE SOMETHING MORE WILL BE NEEDED.

5. FIRST STEP FOR DAMASCUS, HOWEVER, IS TO ENSURE ACTION LEGITIMIZING ITS MILITARY PRESENCE IN LEBANON BY NEW SARKIS REGIME. SARG UNQUESTIONABLY EXPECTS SARKIS TO MOVE IN WAY WHICH WILL GIVE SUCH LEGITIMACY. WE HEAR FROM REGULAR PALESTINIAN SOURCE WITH ESTABLISHED ACCESS TO KHALID FAHUM AND OTHER PALESTINIAN LEADERS THAT SARG HAS "HINTED" IT MAY INITIATE PULLBACK OF SOME OF ITS FORCES FOR REPLACEMENT BY ELEMENTS OF LEBANESE ARMY VANGUARDS TO INAUGURATE SARKIS PRESIDENCY. SOURCE WAS UNABLE TO PROVIDE MORE DETAILS, BUT THIS SUGGESTS THAT ASAD MIGHT BE CONSIDERING TOKEN PULLBACK OF SOME SYRIAN TROOPS FROM THEIR POSITIONS IN LEBANESE MOUNTAINS. THIS WOULD PROVIDE SARKIS WITH DIPLOMATIC LEVERAGE TO RENEW ATTEMPT TO SECURE PALESTINIAN PULLBACK FROM METN AND CREATE MOMENTUM LEADING TO FURTHER NEGOTIATING PROGRESS. FROM SYRIAN STANDPOINT, MOST IMPORTANT BENEFIT OF THIS PROCESS, IF SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENTED, WOULD BE AUTOMATIC LEGITIMIZATION OF SYRIAN FORCES NOT NOW COVERED BY ASF UMBRELLA ORCHESTRATED WITHIN MORE PALATABLE -- FOR SARKIS -- CONTEXT OF TOKEN SYRIAN PULLBACK.

6. MFA AMERICAN AFFAIRS DIRECTOR SHOIFI SUGGESTED ANOTHER SCENARIO TO EMBOFF SEPT. 21. SHOIFI, WHOM CLAIMED EXTENSIVE PREVIOUS PERSONAL CONTACTS WITH MANY CHEHABIST OFFICERS CLOSE TO SARKIS, OBSERVED THAT NEW LEBANESE PRESIDENT WOULD BE LOATH TO UNDERCUT THIS RELATIONSHIP WITH JUMBLATT BY LEGITIMIZING SYRIA'S MILITARY PRESENCE IN LEBANON, YET COULD NOT RISK SYRIAN DISPLEASURE BY PUBLICLY CALLING CONFIDENTIAL

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FOR MILITARY WITHDRAWAL. SHOIFI ASSERTED SARKIS WOULD OPT FOR SAUDI-KUWAITI STRATEGY OF SEEKING SYRO-EGYPTIAN RECONCILIATION AS PRELUDE TO FORGING SETTLEMENT AMONG LEBANESE-PALESTINIAN PARTIES TO CONFLICT.

7. SCENARIOS OUTLINED IN PARAS 5 AND 6 ABOVE ARE NOT UMTALLY EXCLUSIVE, AND UNDOUBTEDLY DO NOT EXHAUST OTHER POSSIBILITIES WHICH INCLUDE SIMPLY MAINTENANCE OF STATUS QUO. TEMPTATION TO CRUSH HIM ADVERSARIES THROUGH DECISIVE MILITARY ACTION MUST STILL EXERT STRONG ATTRACTION ON ASAD; REGULAR SYRIAN SOURCE TELLS US OF WORD IN SOME MILITARY CIRCLES THAT MAJOR OFFENSIVE IN LEBANON IS IMMINENT. SHOIFI HIMSELF SAID HE HEARD REGIME HAS RECENTLY PUT MORE TROOPS INTO LEBANON TO BACK UP THREAT OF OFFENSIVE BY WHICH ASAD HOPES TO EXTRACT CONCESSIONS FROM HIS OPPONENTS.

DESPITE ASAD'S RECENT ASSERTION IN PRIVATE HTAT HE IS NOT SEEKING A MILITARY VICTORY IN LEBANON, WE CANNOT DISCOUNT POSSIBILITY THAT EVENTS MAY DRAFT OUT OF CONTRL AND STIMULATE EXACTLY THIS DESIRE. IN SUM, DANGERS OF RESORT TO INCREASED MILITARY FORCE EXIST, BUT SYRIA PROBABLY WILL PREFER IN INITIAL PERIOD OF SARKIS' PRESIDENCY TO KEEP ALIVE THREAT OF MILITARY ACTION WHILE CONCENTRATING ON POLITICAL EFFORTS TO CREATE NEGOTIATING MEMENTUM AND BOLSTER AUTHORITY OF NEW PRESIDENT. SARKIS' OWN EFFECTIVENESS AS A MEDIATOR WILL THEN BE FIRST TEST OF HIS AUTHORITY.

8. JUST AS SYRIA CONCENTRATED ON REMOVING OBSTACLES DURING HIGH-RISK PERIOD LEADING UP TO SARKIS' INSTALLATION, DAMASCUS LEADERSHIP WILL PROBABLY SEEK TO EXPLOIT POSSIBILITIES FOR POLITICAL PROGRESS DURING HIGH-OPPORTUNITY PERIOD IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING SARKIS INAUGURATION. DANGER OF DECISIVE MILITAARY ACTION BY SYRIANS WILL HEIGHTEN IF SARKIS CANNOT REALIZE TANGIBLE PROGRESS TWOARD SETTLEMENT DURING WHATEVER GRACEPERIOD THE VARIOUS CONTENDERS FOR POWER ON THE LEBANESE STAGE MYA BE PREPARED TO GRANT HIM.

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